

PROLOGUE

Hudson Lake, Michigan

I know everyone in this diner is looking at me like I'm strange.

Well, I'm sure used to that by now. It wasn't always that way, of course. I mean I'm blonde-haired, just turned 30 and once – a million years or so ago before the terrible times happened – people said I was pretty. But now I realize that I look old beyond my years. I've lost a lot of weight, my face is pale and gaunt and I'm trembling noticeably right now even though it is the first real warm day of spring.

I make my way unsteadily over to a stool at the diner's counter and sit there quietly, without talking, even when a guy comes over and asks for my order.

"What'll it be, ma'am?" he smiles.

I stare at him with a confused look on my face. Nothing people say these days - even simple questions like that - seem to make sense to me anymore.

"Ma'am," he repeats.

"Pardon?"

"My name is Danny. Danny Heller. I own this place. What do you want?"

I think about it for a second, then say: "Do you think I could have some tea?"

"Tea, sure."

He walks over to the kitchen area, pours a cup and brings it back to me.

"How about something to eat?" he asks. "A sandwich. Some soup. Maybe a nice piece of pie. We got some nice pies today. Apple. Cherry. Lemon meringue."

"Lemon meringue?"

“Sure. Want a piece?”

I nod. “Yes, that would be nice.”

Danny Heller cuts an extra large slice of the pie, places it onto a plate and carries it back to where I am sitting. I begin eating. Silently and without any emotion. Just like I do everything else now.

“Are you from around here?” he asks.

“No, not from around here.”

What’s your name?

“Uh, I’m Megan…”

“Well, I’m glad to meet you, Megan. Are you just visiting around these parts?”

“I’m…,” I hesitate, because it’s painful to say the words., “I’m…looking for a vacation house.”

“Hey we’ve got some good ones. The lake this time of year is one of the prettiest spots in all of Michigan. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Have you looked at many houses?”

“Not here. Other places.”

“You’ve been traveling then?”

“Yes, I’ve been traveling quite a bit.”

The truth is I have been traveling for nearly a year. I started back east, moving from resort town to resort town along the New England coast. When fall came, I started moving down along the coast toward the winter resorts. Miami Beach. The Gold Coast. The Gulf Shore. Then, with the advent of spring, I had come north and inland to look at lake areas. Ohio. Minnesota. And now Michigan.

In all the places, I've done the same thing. Gone through ads for house rentals. Checked with real estate brokers. Driven aimlessly around shore areas looking.

Always looking.

Looking for the house.

The house I can never forget.

The house of my nightmares.

"We have some local house listings on that bulletin board over there," Danny Heller says, pointing to a wall at the end of the counter. "People with a place to rent put stuff up there. Maybe you'll find something you want."

I get up from my stool and walk over to the bulletin board.

Looking through the ads posted on the bulletin board without really expecting to find anything.

But then I see it.

And I scream!

I scream so loudly that everyone in the diner stops eating and looks at me.

It's a scream that keeps gathering momentum as it goes on like a runaway train, terrifying everyone there.

"What's wrong?" Danny says, rushing over to where I'm standing by the bulletin board.

I point to a picture of a house in one of the ads.

"It's here," I whisper.

"What?"

"The house."

And it is.

The house I've been looking for.

The house from Pleasant Street.

"I don't understand," Danny is saying.

"It's the house," I sob. "Oh, my God, it really is the same house..."